Interview with Alice Pickering

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Foreign Service Spouse Series

ALICE PICKERING

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A STATEMENT by Alice Pickering

Recorded on Friday, September 20, 1991, by Jewell Fenzi and Priscilla Becker at the Residence of the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, on the forty-second floor of the Waldorf Towers in New York City.

PICKERING: Everybody's Foreign Service career is very different. I think that I with my husband have had an interesting variety of experiences and I rather wanted to summarize them before I started talking about New York and the UN.

The ironic part is that our very first post in the Foreign Service was in Geneva, with the USUN Mission there, for a very special conference on disarmament. My husband was assigned to Geneva to the 18-nation Disarmament Conference in 1962 that negotiated the first nuclear test ban treaty. Our present post, which will probably be our last, is also with the UN in New York. So we started and will end in a situation with the UN, which we never expected.

I had been a USIS Officer in the Department and in The Hague, and when I was married in The Hague, I thought I had to resign. I think this is why I have been so aware of the spouse's problems, the legal problems of women who are not officers in the Foreign

Service, because I suffered at the beginning and I've suffered all the way through as a spouse. When I joined the U.S. Information Agency and then decided to marry the next year, it was just absolutely assumed that one had to resign upon marriage.

Now, presumably, I suppose my husband could have resigned, I mean one of us could stay in. I guess there was always that knowledge. But the assumption was that you couldn't both stay in. So I resigned and made my decision and felt, well, at least my husband was in the Foreign Service and this would be something that I wanted to do. I think I had a special advantage in that because it was something that I personally had studied for, had the same training as my husband and I didn't enter as some wives do with absolutely no interest or knowledge about the world or wanting to travel. I must say that I think it's given me a different perspective. But at the same time I've been acutely aware as a result of that, too, of all the problems a spouse has as opposed to a woman officer in our service.

It was not until 1972, that I could have been reinstated. I must say that when the resignations were challenged, the Department did come around — at some point I got information that I could be reinstated if we had resigned on that basis. However, your reinstatement was exactly as you left. I had only been in one year, as a junior officer, and hadn't of course gotten a promotion yet. The possibility of reinstatement was the same year that my husband was getting his first ambassadorship. I thought that was going to be very difficult, not only to find in a very small mission a job that wouldn't conflict but I would be the junior member on the team. (she laughs) So I chose not to reinstate myself.

It was fair, and I could have done so. And I knew some other women who did it. I want observe, though, that the ambassador's wife and the DCM's and consul general's wife, or any people in the senior positions, still have a difficult if not impossible problem of being able to work in an embassy or even another related agency such as USIS or AID. It has been done, I know, but I also think the Department still actively discourages it. And they say so. In my own mind, I know why, because I think that within the embassy

community itself overseas, it is never understood. Even if the spouse is eminently qualified and has worked in special areas before, it's always interpreted as nepotism, which I think is too bad. But I think as a senior wife I have to recognize it. Even as a spouse with no employment in the mission, I have always to be very careful, because what I say or do is often misinterpreted.

I've come to recognize that's a human problem that probably the Department itself cannot ever solve. But I don't think they should continue to actively discourage it or to say “you cannot work.” I know that in the case of the CLOs overseas, it's almost always said: the DCM's wife should not apply. I think that's very unfair, though maybe the ambassador's wife shouldn't but certainly other levels should be able to.

Back to what I said about some unusual aspects of my life as a spouse in the service. My husband and I spent most of our time in the underdeveloped world, at smaller missions, and I include the Middle East aunderdeveloped in that sense as opposed to the larger European or Asian missions. So a lot of what I have to say really is colored by that, I think. It does make a difference what type and size of community you're living in.

Geneva wasn't large because we were with UN Disarmament Mission, perhaps 100 people. So it's always been small posts for us, and therefore we've been more associated — certainly before and after '72 — with close communities of people who were in hardship places and had to depend more on one another. I think that certainly has affected how I look at the service now and all the way along, because we were in situations where it was important that the community stay together. It was our only support group.

Another thing that colors what I have to say is that with the exception of Geneva, I've always been the senior wife. I think that's rather unusual, but my husband's next job was as Consul in Zanzibar, which had become Tanzania the year before we arrived. It was a four-man consulate but nevertheless I was the senior wife. In Dar es Salaam, when my husband was DCM, our ambassador was not married, therefore I always had to serve

for him. We liked him very much so I didn't consider it too onerous although sometimes it was difficult to be hostess for somebody not your husband. And from then on, every time I received official guests my husband was ambassador. There again, I think this affects my viewpoint and maybe isn't fairly reflective of a lot of other people who've come up and have had very different experiences.

I was very worried when we went to Geneva because we'd been in Washington for three years without a promotion. We had been overseas when he was in the Navy, in Morocco. I had lived in The Hague, we had lived in Morocco, Geneva was our first post as Foreign Service. We had spent the three years in Washington, in INR [Bureau of Intelligence and Research], and my husband hadn't been promoted. We went by ship, and I remember saying to him on ship, “Well, where do you think we'll be ten years from now?” We were certainly the most junior member of that delegation in Geneva. You know, (laughing) you sometimes start slowly. Maybe as a result of this early experience, but even in Geneva and certainly in Washington, I think I represented an intermediate group of foreign service wives. I never suffered from an arrogant ambassador's wife who demanded things that were really excessive. I had some friends who were slightly older than me who'd had these experiences; and there were only a few “dragon ladies” as we called them.

I feel very strongly that my generation, as we were entering in the late 50s and 60s, would never ever have even considered, when we contemplated becoming senior wives, asking that kind of subservience or the type of thing we heard about. I personally never experienced it. My senior wives, especially in Geneva when I was a very junior person, were most considerate. When I had small children I was never asked to bring food; if I were, I always considered it a great privilege because it was a learning experience and I look on it that way because I was considered part of the team and I felt this was an opportunity for me to observe and learn.

I think unfortunately the younger people now don't look on it that way, and therefore they don't learn and end up sometimes in situations where they should have known better. Now

junior officerdon't look on the kind of relationships they have within the embassy as this kind of experience. So I speak from a past generation but I think we were already making a transition well before 1972; and '72 represented a reaction to, typically, 25 years before.

Another thing I want to mention abackground to everything I say is that my husband has unintentionally ended up being multi-functional. We volunteered to go to Africa in the 60s, partly because we were “stuck” in Washington for three years and thought the new posts opening in Africa offered an opportunity. We volunteered but didn't hear anything for some time; we went off to Geneva. Suddenly toward the end of our tour there, we got a cable assigning him to Swahili language training and we would go to Lubumbashi in Zaire.

Fine. That's what we'd said we wanted to do except we'd forgotten about it after so long. And a very senior and famous ambassador at our conference, Ambassador Jacob Beam, came into my husband's office saying, “Tom, Tom, how can you do this? If you want to get out of this assignment, I'll get you assigned to something in Europe.” It was still a very Europe-centered service, I believe. My husband was very flattered and came home and we talked about it. We decided that we indeed wanted to go off to the developing world, to the new posts that were opening up. We thought it was a great opportunity — not just for personal aggrandizement but just to contribute, because my husband's level in a huge European mission would have been as vice consul.

So we went off and started to become specialists in the African world. We thought that would be the future, and we quite enjoyed that and looked forward to working in that area. Along the way many things happened. We were not very prescient, because during our first long leave from Zanzibar, in Athens — in those days you weren't brought back to the United States, you were given an R&R post — with about five weeks and two little kids, we decided we would never see the Middle East, and here we were so close, we'd better take our time and money on a trip. So we went all over the Middle East because we were quite assured we'd never end up there!

As I say, we didn't have much foresight. Anyhow, his career has gone from many parts of the world he wasn't especially prepared for. His time in the Department as an assistant secretary was with something nobody had ever heard of before: Oceans, Environment, Science and Technology. This turned out to be one of the most interesting times in our whole career as we made friends with people such as the president of the National Academy of Science, who was then the President's Science Adviser, and with people in many academic institutions who opened our eyes to many things.

So we've had this sort of wide-ranging experience in the service, including consular experience, that I think gave me a wider perspective, perhaps, than among people who've spent an entire career in just one part of the world because of language choices and so forth.

I don't know if you want me to focus on each country or — I'm just speaking overall from all these experiences. Let me speak about Jordan because that was my husband's first experience as ambassador, and I think that point is a very crucial one in anyone's life as to how you look at the service. It changes perspective.

I went to Jordan about two years after the '72 Directive to women, in early January 1974. The Directive, by the way, was issued under Mr. Macomber, the Under Secretary for Management, who had been one of our predecessors in Jordan many years before, in the late 40s as ambassador. He was a bachelor then, and one of the first things I learned when I went to Jordan, where we had a very small, unpretentious house, was that most housing in the Middle East at that time was far less lavish than the houses we'd had in Africa, which were ex-colonial and where the type of living there lent itself to large houses before air-conditioning existed. To tell you the truth, the nicest house we ever lived in was when my husband was DCM in Tanzania, a beautiful house.

We went to Jordan to a much smaller, not very easily manageable house. Everybody kept saying we must find another house. We tried very hard to do some kind of an exchange,

tramped over every hillside in Jordan, and finally came down to some real possibilities. By the way, recallinhistory, this was just after the 1973 Israeli-Egyptian war. Henry Kissinger was Secretary of State and all the disengagement agreements were in operation. Every month Henry Kissinger, Roy Atherton, Joseph Sisco, all the team from the Department's top level to carry out the disengagement, would descend on us.

We truly did need more space than our house provided, we thought. When we got what I thought was a perfectly great agreement on a new house, word suddenly came down from Under Secretary Macomber that he had lived in that house in Jordan as ambassador — as I said, in the late 40s or early 50s — and it had been perfectly adequate for him. He neglected to say he was a bachelor then and obviously without any children. Therefore, as far as he was concerned, that would always remain as the house for the American Ambassador in Jordan. This was a lesso(she laughs) in real politik of the State Department for me.

In any case, I think I learned a lot from that experience and others in Jordan that stood me in good stead later on. Two important things I learned. First of all, there was an American Women's Club in Jordan, about 250 women, and I am always invited [in] most countries to be the honorary president of the American Women's Clubs and always accepted. I never felt I should run the club but I always participated, and I was very happy to do so there because a lot of the American women were married to Jordanians. They needed a support group. We learned from them a lot of things about Jordan. That I thought was very important.

One of the early mistakes I made, inadvertently. I had been there for two years, there was an election for president, and I had been sitting on the board. In the negotiations for a new president, there was some conflict, people thought I had taken sides; I felt I hadn't. The problem was solved later but I learned that I should never sit on the board and vote or participate. I made it clear from then on, and it was a lesson I learned well, to say I would support whoever was elected and whatever the board wanted to do, with one

exception — and I think this is important in terms of volunteerism — I decided that I would participate on the committee that most of these groups have for giving money to charity. There is usually a committee that disburses the monies that they raise, which most groups do. I thought it was important from the embassy'side to make sure we knew where that money was going. I often was able to find out about the recipient organizations and their legitimacy and I always insisted, and participated, in visiting any organization that we might be giving money to and to be part of that group which was non-controversial. Therefore I also personally had the opportunity to learn so much about the country. I found that was the way I could get out without my husband with a group of women and specially visit all kinds of organizations I would never have had access to see otherwise. I often found that very rewarding in all the American groups up to and including Tel Aviv.

The second thing I learned in Jordan that continued in later posts was the issue of morale within the embassy. My husband and I have always taken that very seriously. In fact, the Department charges the ambassador (and wife) to be responsible for the morale at post. This becomes more and more difficult in situations everywhere today, which I discovered in Jordan after two years, when we returned from home leave.

Since it was a two-year post, when we returned there was a new political officer and his wife, a new public affairs officer, a new political counselor and wife — a lot of changes, yet we had only been gone about six weeks. In our absence the charg#'s wife, French-born, had returned to France, so neither she nor I were there. I came back to find “everything” had changed in the mission. Some of the new people were very unhappy, they were demanding all sorts of things from the mission that hadn't been done before. So we had a meeting of all the wives — there was no American Embassy women's group, it was part of the larger group. I called everybody together and we started talking.

One woman said that no one had received them when they arrived. I said, “But I wasn't here, you must really have known the Ambassador and his wife were on leave and that the DCM/charg#'s wife was also not here.” Well yes, she realized we weren't there but

nevertheless she'd never been invited to the house. It was totally irrational on her part but I suddenly realized the importance of something I am still trying to pursue in New York: that the first two weeks, three weeks, one month maximum, that people are at a post is the most important time that you have to help these people integrate into the culture, the country, the embassy, whatever they're a part of. And I've tried my best since then to make sure that there is a CLO — by the way, this was just at the beginning of the CLO program. In fact Jordan, also as a result of my experience, received one of the first CLOs. As soon as the inquiry came out asking which posts wanted a CLO, we sent a cable back the next day saying we did, because I recognized the importance of it and that it was an increasingly difficult problem for senior wives to handle.

I've always participated with the CLO on orientation programs, how they're set up, offering any experience or help that I can on the programs of orientation and greeting newcomers. I consider it the most important part of the mission's contribution to morale, particularly for the spouses and families of employees. Since I came to New York and realized that no program like that had ever existed, certainly not in recent years, we've been trying to revive that. It does make a difference in how people feel toward being part of a mission, even a large one like New York, which probably resembles many of the big European embassies where you don't spend a lot of time together.

So Jordan in many ways was a valuable learning experience for me. It helped me to avoid mistakes later on and helped me look toward what could be done. I discovered early on that it is essential to find something interesting to you as a person in order to keep up your own morale. A senior wife can be lonelier than many others. It'difficult to make friends because it's not often looked at in the way you'd like it. There might be a person whom I'd like very much but she might be the deputy political counselor's wife. No matter what one does, people notice whom you spend time with and petty jealousies can develop. It's very difficult, and sometimes the senior wife can have a lot of problems, emotional and every other kind, because she can be the loneliest person in the mission. So I have found that for a senior wife — and I don't mean just the ambassador's wife but any level, really —

you must try hard to find friends, either of course in the community in which you're dealing, or with diplomatic colleagues, and to find your own resources even if you're not in a work situation.

For me Jordan was wonderful also because it opened my eyes to archeology. I took courses through the American Center of Oriental Research and I'm proud to say that just this year I've been named to the board of trustees of the over-all American organization that will be working with the Center in Jordan. So that has continued as a lifelong interest for me. My husband and I spent time every weekend visiting archeological sites, and that again was important for us because we discovered that sometimes it's very hard to have a private life, a personal life. I've always felt that in order for him, or if a woman officer, for her, to do a job well, you also have to develop your personal life and interests. We were able to do that in every place we've been because we were interested in travel and history and archeology which you can find anywhere in the world.

So I use Jordan as an example because at every stage in one's career in one's position you have to learn from it and, hopefully, adapt it to very different situations where you are. I've thought a lot about that.

I participated whenever I could, including in Washington. I work when I'm in the U.S. and consider myself a professional totally apart from the Foreign Service. Early on in our career, when we were in Africa with young children, a colleague of ours died in West Africa of hepatitis, another died in a plane accident, and this was years ago before terrorism or any of those dangers arose. I suddenly realized, “good grief, here I am, anything could happen to my husband at any time, how am I going to support myself and my children? I can't go back to this diplomatic career which I've left, it would be very difficult to reenter.” I felt I should prepare myself in a different area.

So for ten long years in and out of Washington, I finished my degree in library science. For the last six years of our time in Washington I worked as a professional librarian in the

Fairfax County library system. So therefore in a sense I consider myself a professional woman, and I consider what I do in the Foreign Service as an unpaid member of that service, also as a profession. I think most serious senior wives do when they decide to participate. And it is professional — management, personnel issues, leadership issues, being able to participate in the life of the country, representing your country on a very high level — I think it should be considered as a profession.

I have come to believe, after thinking about it over many years, that senior [wives] should be compensated — not for some reasons people have advanced but because, simply, in our society respect comes with pay. In recent years I have found that I have won very little respect even from the officers in our own mission because I'm not paid and I'm not considered part of the team by our own Department. Therefore, people assume I do not know or do anything.

At various points, particularly in El Salvador, which I'd like to talk about, which was a very difficult, intense, high-level public profile post for us and where we were in constant danger all the time including, as all the newspapers said, specific death threats to my husband and our having to be taken out on 24 hours' notice — I was very much part of that team in that particular country.

Our house was very secure — it actually looked like a maximum-security prison — as I considered it, the good guys were in the jail, everybody else was outside! There was barbed wire everywhere and there were Marines at the house, which we've never had before or since, and on the roof all night. We had these young men with us all the time, we traveled with maximum security. And because our house was considered safe, everybody stayed with us. We had, I would say, in the two years time we were there, probably fifteen major senators with us — [Lloyd] Bentsen (D, Texas), [Gary] Hart (D, Colorado), William Cohen (Maine), David Boren (D, Oklahoma) and others. They stayed the night with us, they held meetings there, I had breakfast with them if my husband wasn't there. We had every major military chief-of-staff, because it was then that kind of situation in El Salvador.

I participated fully and it was a full-time job, and I do remember at one point where we also had a lot of junior women officers. Most of the people in the mission were single people, since it was very difficult for dependents with children to be there in that era. Anyway, Representative [Stephen] Solarz (D, New York), whom I think everybody knows, came very often. We've known him for many years; he came to Jordan. His wife was not expected to come, in fact few wives accompanied the representatives. My role most of the time was in the household keeping everything on track for suddenly you'd be called and forty people were arriving on thirty minutes notice. I had to make sure our household was running.

In this case, at the very last minute, on a Friday, say, we were informed that Mrs. (Nina) Solarz, who's a very active person and a professional in her own right, would arrive separately from Congressman Solarz and would like to see and do certain things on her own, including visiting some refugee camps. I was very involved with something in El Salvador, I don't recall exactly what, and couldn't accompany her, so I was told to call a junior woman officer — it could as well have been a man — and tell her the situation and ask her to accompany Mrs. Solarz. Which I did. The answer I got from the young FSO was, “Oh, Mrs. Pickering, I'm very sorry, I can't do it, my weekends are free, why not let one of the wives do it?”

I was outraged. I didn't answer her, I was stunned, I should have said, “Well, the wives like to have their weekends too.” I doubt if she realized how important Congressman Solarz is and that Mrs. Solarz might be a very nice contact for a young officer to make, to accompany her to a refugee camp. These were some of the experiences I was beginning to have in El Salvador. Perhaps this is just when it happened to surface for me personally. I found that there was total ignorance in the younger officers' corps of my role or the role of any senior wife in the mission; total lack of understanding of the representational function, they had never been told, it's not part of the A-100 course, it's not mandatory for any wives to go to courses any more.

It got so difficult in El Salvador that somewhere along the line my husband and I sat down and wrote a little protocol guideline for the officers in our mission, i.e., “please come on time when you are invited to a reception or a dinner.” We made it very clear: “Your spouse does not have to accept as a non-employee. However, if you accept, please understand this is a working dinner; you are expected to assist in talking to the other guests and assist with the party. Please answer the invitations.” I'm appalled at how many young officers do not answer our invitations. Even if it's often 'regrets only' but they don't even reply to that.

The young officers coming in are trained in every other aspect, but they're not told that this representational function is part of the mission's policy in a country, part of our efforts. We're given money to do that and we're very accountable for that money. The ambassador and his wife, the DCM and his wife, the political counselor and his wife cannot be the sole people responsible for this important function. This is the opportunity to meet people from the country in which they're serving. So many of them, particularly the spouses, look on it only as a social occasion. I have no objections if they do not choose to participate, I'm fairly modern about accepting that. But if they choose to come, I do feel that since I and my husband work very hard at these social events in terms of meeting people and talking to them, everyone should be part of it. I don't think that entering officers who are married, be they male or female, receive any counseling about life overseas. I've ended up recently — in Tel Aviv, by the way — with young wives whom I've asked, “What happened in Washington before you came out?” and they say, “Well, nothing, we weren't able to go to the A-100 course because my husband was moving, I was left behind in New Jersey to pack, I don't know anything, I don't know what I'm supposed to do.”

I find that more and more true. Maybe the opportunities are there and are simply not being used — I think there are great information and communication gaps, because I know there are areas in the Department that are trying to offer this. But I find so many young wives in particular arrive at post with absolutely no knowledge of what the Foreign Service is about. This is sort of something their husbands decided to do, they simply do not know where to

start or to fit in. It becomes a major problem for the senior people. Plus the fact, of course, that there are more and more tandem couples.

From the viewpoint of a non-employee wife the advent of tandem couples has brought enormous changes in the way a mission operates. In Tel Aviv we had several, in fairly high-level positions.

My experience with that, as much as I approve and think it's wonderful and it certainly is never going to go back to anything else, is that they're not carrying their representational load. And I must say that in many ways all these great reforms which are steps forward have made it more and more difficult for the few senior wives who are willing tcontinue — because our responsibilities have become greater in that sense. I can appreciate if, say, the woman officer is working ten hours a day, how can she entertain? But what if she is the economic counselor and he is the political counselor, who then is going to take up their responsibility on the representational side?

In Tel Aviv, for example, we did have a large house and we did have a staff; not the best I've ever had, and wfound that week after week we were being asked by different sections of our mission to do a party for them, I mean it was their party, they had a visitor and they would like to invite their contacts, but let's do it at the ambassador's house, let's ask the ambassador to do it for us. It would be their portion of the representational effort in funds but let's do it at his house.

Again I go back to a younger generation which perhaps has a different view of this whole function. They simply thought, “Well, let's do it at the ambassador's house; it's very easy to do it there. Why not?” Because the better a house is run, the better these representational events are done. And the easier they look it means somebody has done a lot more work behind the scenes, and that's usually me or somebody in my position. If I'm not there in a situation where there is an unmarried ambassador, the Department would hire somebody to do this. Which I very much resent, because the function is recognized, it's not a question

of not recognizing the function. Otherwise, why would they pay in a situation where there is not a wife to do this?

The Department in my opinion has given up the “two for” philosophy. We no longer consider that the Department gets “two for one,” as we all know, but they still want it both ways, they still want a wife who's there to do it but they will less and less recognize her, less and less compensate her even in terms of respect and position within the mission. And I don't see that so far the function has changed. (End of tape, side A)

In any case, in compensation terms I believe there has to be some way of doing this, or we have to face the fact that representation, therefore, isn't considered really part of U.S. foreign policy. At the moment, the Department gives us the money and recognizes the function but they're making it more and more difficult to do. I assume that in the next ten or fifteen years there won't be people like myself who decided we would stay with this and do the best job we could for the sake of our husband, first of all and secondly our country, as well as pride when you're in another country of representing well our country and our mission. I suspect that is going to change drastically and I think the Department then has to decide: are they just going to put representation into hotels and restaurants, which will be a totally different thing; are they just going to hire people to do it; or do they want it done in the way it's been done in the past, with a very personal style, and help the senior wife do it well?

If it's not salary, if it's not a supplement to the husband's salary, at least — and I know many women have expressed this — it should be access to Social Security. In our present American society people are absolutely lost if they don't have that access. Because of being overseas so much, I don't have enough time that I've earned on my own for Social Security, and will not, so I've given up my access to partake of the benefits of our society. And I think that is VERY unfair of our Department not to recognize that as a very real issue for the wives.

I was very insulted by the Department representative who came to Tel Aviv to explain the program that was proposed at that time of the new Associates program which was to provide more access for women to work in the embassies, more access to having jobs in the community — a very good program. Many of us felt rather upset that they were sending a man who was only “assigned” to this, he had not been involved; we thought some of the people who had worked on the program should be making these tours outside the country to explain to the missions' spouses and families what the program was all about.

We called a meeting in Tel Aviv. We must have had the best turnout of all the wives we ever had — more than for any tea or anything I ever gave, because everybody was very interested in this. He explained, grudgingly — he was not, I think, himself in favor, we got that distinct impression. The DCM's wife raised the question: “Well, you haven't considered in any of this the role of the senior wives and how they might be compensated for this role.” He really put her down, in fact she was in tears, which is very bad for a woman to do, I know! And I raised my hand and tried to go over that situation and said to him, “Why is it not possible, when the Department gives contracts to roofers, contracts to swimming pool attendants, contracts to the children to be lifeguards — if I spend two hours in the town of Tel Aviv helping to buy dishes or curtains for the mission, why can't I turn in a time sheet? Or if I spend three hours preparing for or shopping in the market for such-and-such a party and it could easily be identified what and when it was done, I would be happy to accept minimum pay per hour, just the minimum wage, more than I get now. Because I reckon I spend sometimes 30, 40 or more hours per week on mission affairs. Why wouldn't that be possible? At least give us an income, at least give us Social Security credit? Because I truly believe for most senior wives it's not the amount that counts. We're not at all asking to be paid on the level of even an FSO-8, we're just asking for some compensation, which will then give people an idea within even our own community, let alone the Department, of the time and what goes into this job.”

He looked me straight in the eye — I will not tell you this man's name — and said, “Oh but Mrs. Pickering, how could we verify that? Nobody would be willing to supervise that because of your husband's position.” (she pauses) I felt that challenged my integrity, that I would lie about the hours! I was so dumbfounded, absolutely completely dumbfounded by an answer that I felt was so insulting, so rude, I couldn't answer. Afterwards of course I felt I could have made a perfect answer and say, “How do you trust the drivers in our mission when you send them on an errand and they give you a time sheet? How do you trust anybody in our mission who does things outside the purview of a supervisor to give you honest answers?”

But I believe that was the type of reaction that senior wives always get when they propose some of these solutions. I don't think it's always the bottom line of money, although money is a bottom line and funds have to be found. I think it's a drop in the bucket compared to what is spent on many contracts and people who come out on TDY. I'm sure a salary could be paid out of very few visits. I think it is definitely an attitude and I think that is going to have to change. I don't see any signs, unfortunately, that it's changing, because we now have an inspector general in the Department who is outside, as is true of all other government departments, an independent inspector general with some component of foreign service officers. My recent experience with the people in that office has been exactly the same type of experience where it's presumed that we are cheating or that we are somehow trying to make money from the government. There's a presumption of waste, fraud and mismanagement up front, and the feeling is that they are going to find ways to make sure that we do not order too much food so that we can eat on it for a month — very simplistic ways of looking at it. It comes I think really ultimately from Congress, which is a populist organization in concerns of representation going way back to the “booze allowance” and all these things we've all heard about over the years; a refusal to look at the job that has to be done.

I come to New York, because we're in a unique situation here as we're our country's only diplomatic mission in our own country, it's unique. A lot of the problem is legislative. Some of the foreign service legislation was written I don't believe with intent to exclude New York but simply was written for foreign posts overseas. So there was nothing ever put in to cover us in New York. I must say, in the last administration when the United Nations was not popular in the U.S. or in Congress, there was never an effort to put that in.

I find that outrageous, however, because what it does is to affect people in our own service, people assigned to New York to serve in this mission. We are here with the largest diplomatic corps in the whole world — 20,000 people, much larger than Washington. Until this week there were 159 countries; now there are 175. There's no country in the world that hosts that many other countries' missions. Plus the fact that our main effort here is to work with all other countries, there are no bilateral situations in a multilateral organization.

Many of those other missions' ambassadors are uninstructed so those ambassadors here have great leeway in how they vote or do not vote since they don't have time always to get back to their governments. So their representative really has more power than my husband when it comes to voting. Our job is to know these people. We've had an extraordinary experience this year with the war in the Gulf, where I believe very strongly that thpersonal relationships that we helped establish and cultivate over the last few years helped us gain votes that we needed as a government for our U.S. foreign policy.

My husband and I worked very hard from the minute we came here. On top of the issues that are being discussed in the UN at the General Assembly, in the Security Council, in the Economic and Social Council, the range of topics is absolutely mind-boggling. I thought the Middle East was complicated and issues were important, and they are, but we're dealing with every issue in the entire world. My husband and others today are working very hard on Cambodia; we've seen the emergence of Namibia as a new country. We've seen

enormous changes in the world, the most enormous changes, I think, since we entered the service in the 1950s.

My husband was not appointed to the service when he first passed the FS exam because everybody was frozen as a result of the McCarthy hearings and we waited three years to come in. We went out to Africa at the height of the Cold War, and this is the first opportunity since then to see the world change. We have been part of that at the UN so we feel very fortunate to have been here at this time.

I find it very disenchanting to feel that our own Department despite these world changes so clearly reflected at the UN continues to feel people who are here in New York somehow have to sink or swim, without realizing that to me and every single American unless you happen to have been born in New York City, this is as much a foreign city as any place I've ever been. To come and live in New York involves for most of us just as great a cultural adaptation as an overseas assignment.

Our people — wives, families, spouses — need help on this, but our inspector general does not look at it this way. They're looking at it in their purview of the budget, not in terms of the job that has to be done. Aside from New York I think it's also happening everywhere, because of the way this particular independent inspector looks at our missions. They don't look at the job that has to be done, they look at how much we spend and how we spend it, without any comprehension of where we are going or why we're doing it.

As I mentioned earlier — I did mention it and really want to get back to it, because I also find it within the U.S. component of our embassies — there is a populist kind of streak in Americans which we recognize, I know, but now it's sort of becoming that we're “elitist” because we entertain. We have to entertain, it's the way we must do it, it's the way diplomatic life is done and it hasn't changed yet. When it changes I'll be happy to change, becaus(laughing) I really enjoy picnics a lot more. But I feel if we're going to do this for the U.S. Government it should be done well.

In New York we are the host country, for example, and I feel we should do this as well as any other mission in New York. When we invite New Yorkers who're involved, I want it to be the best. I'm proud of that. And to have people say, now an explicit sort of thing, “Well, you're being elitist by doing this,” is very discouraging. There is a negative feeling, a very pervasive resentment of the fact that somehow we live here in the Waldorf — sorry about that, if it weren't called the Waldorf maybe the stereotype would be different. Even sometimes Americans in our own mission don't understand that we're not living here as a personal choice, that we have to live in a place that's big enough to have representatives of the 175 countries, that we have to have a staff.

People misunderstand, they think it's “wonderful that you have maids and servants and cooks.” Of course it would be impossible for me to do this without them but they also don't understand the psychic toll it takes on many Americans, including myself, never to have any privacy: I don't have any privacy in my home because we have staff there, and in any large residence it's the same.

I have the responsibility of dealing on a day-to-day basis with all the problems and issues of that staff. I learned labor negotiations in Tel Aviv, I really did, I had to. When contracts were proposed for their pay, I've had to defend my staff sometimes against mindless cuts by our administration, because I consider the residence staff as important as embassy staff to the running of our mission. They're the ones that make it possible for us to fulfill this representational aspect and I feel that if they are not treated well by our government, given reasonable working conditions, reasonable salary increases, they won't stay. And if we don't keep good people, then the ambassador or the principal officer is not going to be able to carry out his function. It's incumbent on me because I'm there every day and they come to me with problems and issues that I have to solve. It's not easy. It's not a bed of roses to have servants all the time and yet it's misunderstood. I find that there is this rising sort of misunderstanding of what we're trying to do even among our own junior officers and mission staff, and that is quite upsetting to me.

Plus the fact that there's another whole issue that has changed since we entered in the 1950s. Every foreign service person knows this, and that's the issue of danger and terrorism threats. I know that our Department is very conscious of this, I know we've increased the number of security officers. I think they're trying very hard and I'm not criticizing that. What I think has not been recognized is the toll in stress and worry on families and spouses. This is very different from thirty years ago.

Thirty years ago we went to Zanzibar after the revolution there. In fact we went because our predecessor, Frank Carlucci, who went on to be Secretary of Defense, was persona non grataed from Zanzibar, so we didn't go to Lubumbashi in the Congo. My husband was the only one in Swahili language training, so we went to Zanzibar. Which was wonderful, I was thrilled to go there, but at that particular time we were isolated. There were East Germans, whom the U.S. did not recognize, The Peoples Republic of China, whom we didn't recognize, and North Vietnam, North Korea, all the Eastern European states. There were four Western consulates there — the French, the British Deputy High Commission, ourselves and the Israelis.

We were completed isolated. We sent our son in first grade a half day to a onetime Catholic school made over into a public school and then I taught him at home. Our little daughter never went to school at all until third grade, she was tutored. Children wouldn't come to play with them because we were “the imperialists,” after this great revolution in Zanzibar. I recall dropping my seven year-old son at a corner in the old town of Zanzibar, then I would go around the corner and wait because his one friend in the school was the son of a Goan from India, a doctor who was still on the island. The doctor couldn't have it be seen that we were taking his son to our house although he was happy to have the child come. We would drop him, they would take him, then we'd pick him up. Looking back now, I don't know how we had the nerve to leave the child down there in the midst of the town.

So there were all these problems there. I learned this lesson also, which was very hard for a young American just out of college and just going out in the Foreign Service to

understand — that people could not speak to you, shun you not because of you yourself but because of your country. I think that's a very hard thing, and people don't always learn it readily. I learned right in the beginning, that OK, that's it, it's nothing to do with me; it's because of our relation to the U.S. that these people aren't going to have anything to do with me.

Anyway, going back to terrorism, which I started to mention. I was never afraid there. I mean, I never thought even with all these revolutionaries that anybody was out to get us. They disliked us; they would have nothing to do with us. It wasn't at the level that if they didn't like you they would kill the American Consul, and so on. That was “early days” in that sense. What is changed now is that we Americans have become targets and it's not always the senior officer, it can be anybody. But it is a stressful thing for senior officers. And again I think in regard to the role of the wife and families. The Department doesn't recognize how difficult this is — to carry on, to do the job that we're doing voluntarily, to represent your country and have this other stress and concern for your husband all the time. I just want to bring it up because that's another great bichange since we came in, as a personal thing.

I believe the Foreign Service always has reflected and always will reflect our own society. I know that, and therefore all these changes that have taken place within the service — the specific ones such as equal employment opportunities for minorities and women, tandem couples, the '72 Directive — all these are good and reflect our society and we wouldn't want it any other way. I'm not objecting to any of it. I'm only sorry that I as [an] individual didn't benefit from all of that. BUT on the other hand, what has been lost — and this is the other major change for me personally during the last thirty years — is the sense of community that existed before that time. I think there was simply a different way of looking at our missions at that time: a wife went out with her husband expecting to be part of the mission, expecting to be considered part of it, that has the bad and the good with it. And we did lose the good aspects, because people are no longer close as a community. Therefore, I think we are having lots more problems with all the things we know about, that

also reflect our society, because we have lost our support groups. The Department has been up front about alcoholism, I'm happy about that, but it's still up to the supervisor to identify that and that's very difficult.

The mental health program has been wonderful. In El Salvador I was behind our mission's getting that established. It was extremely important at the time we were there and we happened to have a very fine dependent wife who took that on. And I think that program when it works well is wonderful for a mission. It doesn't work well sometimes if you don't have the right person there to do it, and that's a big problem.

I know in my last post, Tel Aviv, it was extremely difficult to the group of spouses and their children and their families together again. My point is, it doesn't have to be “together” in the sense that we've all got to do the same things and go the same place and have a private club. I don't mean that at all. I simply feel it's a need to feel that they all are participating in some way in what the embassy's doing in the country.

What happens now is that there are individuals — and I recognize some of them you can't help no matter what you do — who become what I would call “bad apples.” They complain, they expect embassies to do everything for them, they make unrealistic demands. But at the same time this influences a lot of other people, including first-time people serving and it affects other agencies because our embassies now include lots of them besides the Foreign Service. Instant communications make life very difficult. You have Secretaries of State dropping in on you every other day, which you didn't in the past! You have enormous frustrations sometimes dealing with the country you're in because someone on CNN is saying something in the United States that twenty years ago the country would never hear. (laughter) I'm serious!

There is so much more stress and tension, plus our role in the world, plus terrorism, that it's sad that within our own mission we are also having more tensions among our own people. And it's partly because of our own society and the way it's developing, partly what

the Department has decided to do. And I really seriously feel the Department is not even trying to help before people go to posts. They seem to think they'll “do it all when people get to post,” somehow. And somehow I don't think that's enough.

I think there has to be a lot more counseling, more training; even making it mandatory, if possible, though that's not possible for all young wives, but a lot of them simply don't get the message that it's important. They say, “Gee, I wish I'd really known it's so important to know about all these things.” People need a lot more support from the Department, in the Department, so that when they're preparing all these young officers and getting them all trained to go out, it's important to include their families, too.

Then, of course, there is the senior officer's wife's “problem” because they'll always say you've got recognition because you're the wife of the husband. Of course, there is the Avis Bohlen Award [for outstanding volunteerism]; that's one person a year. I know there are efforts to recognize volunteer work and what people have put into volunteer work. I think the Department makes these statements; I assume they mean it. I assume that probably this will help all the way along the line. But it's only, now, for volunteerism, right?

A lot of these younger wives are still very consumed not with volunteerism but “let's get a job.” My point is, we have also helped on that, with work agreements and all these things that we've all pushed. But there still needs to be counseling because there are countries they'll go to where there's no work agreement. There are going to be professions like my own, which is librarianship, in which I was preparing myself for employment in the U.S. if I had to; I wasn't thinking about working overseas. But if I had, I wouldn't have chosen librarianship because you have to have languages. I can't go to Tel Aviv and get a job because I'd have to have Hebrew, I'd have to know intimately the language of every country. So that's a lousy profession for working overseas.

People still need to know that there are going to be situations where they'll probably not be able to work. And that's where I think pre-counseling comes in, I think, for young couples

entering the service. What are you going to do when there are such situations? Then volunteerism might enter but a lot of young people don't think of that on the first level and I don't think it will get the kind of recognition that a lot of us really would like to have. It's going to be recognition for volunteering, not recognition for a job we're doing for the U.S. Government, which the government on one hand says is tremendously important, yet when you do it they'll say it's "volunteerism."

On many points here, for example, I'm a non-employee. I tell you my problem in New York. I am the wife of the chief of mission and so forth, but I cannot set foot in a government car unless my husband is in the car. When Mrs. Perez de Cuella[wife of the UN Secretary General] asks me for lunch for Mrs. Bush, and the streets are blocked and I can't get a taxi — which I'd have to pay for, other people in our mission if they make official visits are reimbursed, I cannot be — I have to get myself there somehow. I can't drive in the city because there's no place to park. I cannot get into a U.S. Government car alone. They can send wine from the mission to my house, it can arrive in the car, flowers can come in the car, messages can be sent over, but I walk. That's fine, good exercise for me. But on principle I do not understand this, and I have never in my whole career ever used an official car for anything but diplomatic calls, official events, I've always had my own car and driven to the hairdresser and all that. I've always recognized that line. But in New York, I can't use my own car because I can't park. I'm not willing in principle to pay $50, $60, $80 a month for taxi fares on business for the U.S. Government. I'm invited for lunch up in the East 80s. I've refused lunches last year from three ambassadors for their foreign minister — one was out in Scarsdale; some ambassadors live in the suburbs. I couldn't get there without spending a considerable amount of money. Frankly I'm very resentful of that. I'm invited to these things as wife of the U.S. representative. Certainly in all 175 other missions at the UN the wife has access to a car for official events.

That's the kind of thing I mean about being a "non-employee." I'm not employed by the U.S. Government, I have no access to cars, no access to anything. On the other hand the

government says, I can't accept a gift or I can't give political speeches. They have it both ways. I would like to challenge that sometime and say, “Why can't I receive a gift?”

There was no senior wife here in the mission for ten years when I came. I went to all the various things in New York that involved the UN, made contacts, and people were ecstatic. “We haven't seen anybody from the U.S. mission for years.” It wasn't just me as a wife. The contact had been lost with the New York City Commission for the UN, for all the volunteer groups from the city that worked with UN delegation wives. Everything I did was “wonderful” simply because I appeared.

Right now I can't say how many invitations we get a week; it's just hundreds. My husband also feels — and this is why the job up here is incredible, not just diplomatically in the UN — that part of his job is to speak about what's happening now at the UN because of major changes from the beginning, I mean with the beginning and end of the Cold War — all the things happening up here that were making it possible to get long-range things done — environmental things, all the things the UN works on that nobody hears about.

He feels that it's such an important part of his job to convey to the American people what is happening at the UN. So he's got a double job that most of the other countries' representatives don't have, but we feel if the U.S. public doesn't understand what's happening, there won't be support for the UN and we think it's important for our foreign policy. It all follows around.

It's a very personal commitment, though, and often a sacrifice, because a lot of these affairs are on weekends. When I'm invited and they will pay my expenses, I'm allowed to accept that if it's specifically for a speech or the like, because I enjoy that and I love hearing questions Americans ask, just as I would if I were in some other country. So we have that whole element of the job, and we have all those invitations to balance off against the specific UN-related organizations which right now are very busy because all the heads of state are coming.

I find it infinitely fascinating and rewarding, just as I've felt at all our posts. I've always found something extraordinary in each country, and I find that if people don't come into our service with that feeling, that they're looking for or hoping to find these opportunities, they don't have an enjoyable time, and I feel sorry about that. Wherever we've been I've tried to open up opportunities for people, particularly for spouses and family and I concentrate on that. I really don't try to interfere, and overseas I don't attempt to speak in any way for the government. But I've ended up being leader of many groups and I guess in that sense I've become a “people specialist.”

The UN is kind of a culmination of all that yet I do enjoy it, and it irks the life out of me that I have to walk the streets of New York to get to these things I'm doing for the U.S. Government. And it irks me that the Department doesn't care. I mean, I have the distinctive feeling that from top to bottom really nobody cares whether I do this or not and that there is no comprehension or consideration of what “wife of” can contribute to the mission. And so I'm doing it for myself, my husband, and probably for my country, but I get very negative vibes from our Department right now. I do. That's why I think this is very important for me personally to be able to express these things.

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BIOGRAPHICAL DATA

Spouse: Thomas R. Pickering

Spouse's position: Political Officer, Consul, DCM, Ambassador, Assistant Secretary of State, U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations

Spouse entered Service: July 1959Left Service: Active Duty You entered Service: September 1954Left Service: December 1955 (marriage; USIS, The Hague, Netherlands)

Status: Ambassador's spousePosts:

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September 1954 - December, 1955 - The Hague, The Netherlands (This was my own assignment as a F.S. Officer with U.S. Information Agency, resigned upon marriage)

With Spouse: 1959-1962Washington, DC, Bureau of Intelligence & Research 1962-1964Geneva, Switzerland, U.S. Mission to the United Nations at the 19-Nation Disarmament Conference 1964-1965Washington, DC, Language Training (Swahili) 1965-1967Zanzibar, Tanzania, U.S. Consulate (U.S. Consul) 1967-1969Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania, U.S. Embassy (DCM) 1969-1973Washington, DC, Bureau of Political-Military Affairs (Deputy Director) 1973-1974Washington, DC (Executive Secretary of the Department) 1974-1978Amman, Jordan, U.S. Embassy (U.S. Ambassador) 1978-1981Washington, DC, Assistant Secretary of State for Oceans, Environment, Scientific & Technical Affairs 1981-1983Lagos, Nigeria, U.S. Embassy (Ambassador) 1983-1985San Salvador, El Salvador, U.S. Embassy (Ambassador) 1985-1989Tel Aviv, Israel, U.S. Embassy (Ambassador) 1989-presNew York, New York, U.S. Mission to the United Nations, U.S. Permanent Representative

Place/Date of birth: Sharon, Pennsylvania; June 15, 1931

Maiden name: Stover

Parents:

George C. Stover, teacher

Alice G. Stover, teacher

Schools:

Sharon High School; Swarthmore, BA

Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, MA

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Catholic University, MSLS (Library Science)

Profession:

Foreign Service officer, 1 year

Librarian

Date/Place of marriage: November 24, 1955; The Hague, Netherlands

Children:

Timothy R. Pickering, March 19, 1957

Margaret S. Pickering, December 28, 1959

Volunteer and Paid Positions held: At Post (No Paid Positions): Amman, JordanPresident, American Women's Association Lagos, NigeriaPresident, American Women's Association San Salvador, El SalvadorPresident, American Women's Association Tel Aviv, IsraelPresident, American Women's Association Tel Aviv, IsraelProgram Chair, International Women's Club - led seminar on women's issues New York, New YorkPresident, UN Heads of Mission Wives' Group; Board of Governors; Foreign Policy Association Off-the-Record Luncheons; Board of Metropolitan Committee for UNICEF; Board of Trustees, American Center for Oriental Research (Amman, Jordan)

In Washington:Regional Reference Librarian, Sherwood Regional Library, Fairfax County, Virginia

Honors:

BA, magma cum laude

Library of Congress

Phi Beta Kappa

Beta Phi Mu (Librarian Honor Society)

End of interview